

# **THE IOWA SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT VISIT PROCESS**

**STATE OF IOWA  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
GRIMES STATE OFFICE BUILDING  
400 E. 14<sup>th</sup> Street  
DES MOINES, IOWA 50319-0146**

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## **LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY**

### **Chapter 256.11 - Iowa Code EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS**

The state board shall adopt rules under chapter 17A and a procedure for accrediting all public and nonpublic schools in Iowa offering instruction at any or all levels from the pre-kindergarten level through grade twelve. The rules of the state board shall require that a multicultural, gender fair approach is used by schools and school districts. The educational program shall be taught from a multicultural, gender fair approach. Global perspectives shall be incorporated into all levels of the educational program.

The rules adopted by the state board pursuant to section 256.17, Code Supplement 1987, to establish new standards shall satisfy the requirements of this section to adopt rules to implement the educational program contained in this section.

#### **Chapter 256.11 (10).**

The state board shall establish an accreditation process for school districts and nonpublic schools seeking accreditation pursuant to this subsection and subsections 11 and 12. By July 1, 1989, all school districts shall meet standards for accreditation. For the school year commencing July 1, 1989, and school years thereafter, the department of education shall use a two-phase process for the continued accreditation of schools and school districts.

Phase I shall consist of annual monitoring by the department of education of all accredited schools and school districts for compliance with accreditation standards adopted by the state board of education as provided in this section. Phase I monitoring requires that accredited schools and school districts annually complete accreditation compliance forms adopted by the state board and file them with the department of education. Phase I monitoring requires a comprehensive desk audit of all accredited schools and school districts including review of accreditation compliance forms, accreditation visit reports, methods of administration reports, and reports submitted in compliance with section 256.7, subsection 21, paragraph "a", and section 280.12.

The department shall conduct site visits to schools and school districts to address accreditation issues identified in the desk audit. Such a visit may be conducted by an individual departmental consultant or may be a comprehensive site visit by a team of departmental consultants and other educational professionals. The purpose of a comprehensive site visit is to determine that a district is in compliance with minimum standards to provide a general assessment of educational practices in a school or school district and make recommendations with regard to the visit findings for the purposes of improving educational practices above the level of minimum compliance. The department shall establish a long-term schedule of site visits that includes visits of all accredited schools and school districts as needed.

## **PURPOSE OF THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SITE VISITS**

The purposes of school improvement site visit are found in 281-IAC 12.8(4) (A) (2) of Iowa Administrative Code. The purposes are as follow:

- To assess progress with the comprehensive school improvement plan
- To make recommendations with regard to the visit findings for the purposes of improving educational practices above minimal compliance
- To determine that a school or school district is in compliance with the accreditation standards
- To provide a general assessment of educational practices

## **PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES**

### **Site Visit Cycle:**

All accredited non-public schools and public school districts receive a school improvement site visit led by Iowa Department of Education (DE) staff, with visits occurring on a scheduled cycle (every five years). The site visit cycle is posted on the D E website. Approximately 104 visits are conducted each year, including both schools and school districts. The only criterion used for selection is the time since the last visit.

Of the scheduled public school district site visits scheduled each year, 10 are identified for an in-depth focus on equity. The criterion for selecting a district for an in-depth focus on equity includes the following:

- Enrollment patterns in career and technical education programs (gender, racial/ethnic background, disability)
- Demographics of the local educational agency (e.g., rapid changes in the demographics of the general or student population)
- Time elapsed since the last on-site review
- Referrals from other Iowa Department of Education staff and other state and regional agencies or complaints received from parents, students, staff, applicants for employment, or community representatives

### **Notification of Visit:**

Late spring, each agency receiving an on-site visit during the next school year will be notified by letter. The notification letter includes information about the following:

- Legislative authority and the purpose of the site visit
- Date of the visit
- Parameters of the visit
- Makeup of the visitation team
- Information needed to prepare for the visit
- Overview of the visitation process
- Reference to the DE website address where more specific visit information is located, such as a document review checklist, groups to be interviewed , model schedules, an interview

protocol, and overview presentation guidelines

### **Length of Site Visit:**

The on-site reviews are typically two to five days in length. This will vary with the size of the agency and whether it is an accredited non-public school or a public school district. Most all non-public school visits are two days in length. Most public school district visits are three days in length. The largest school districts in the state have four or five day visits. If there are unique accreditation issues in a school or district the, length of the visit might be affected.

### **Site Visit Team Membership:**

The number of team members varies depending on the size of the school or district. Most non-public school site visits have two to four team members. Numbers of team members on public school visits range from four to fifteen members depending on the size of the district. A greater number of team members are likely on the largest public school district site visits. The site visit team will be led by a school improvement consultant from the Department of Education, usually the school improvement consultant assigned to the area education agency (AEA) where the school or district is located. Remaining members of the team come from the DE, AEAs, and local schools and districts, as required by law. Team membership might also include staff from post-secondary institutions and state educational organizations (e.g., Iowa Association of School Boards). Team member registration is accomplished through the DE web site from May to September.

### **Site Visit Schedule:**

Much of the site visit schedule will consist of staff interviews, review of documents, and observations during building tours. Each visit starts with an overview presentation and ends with "Site Visit Highlights," a summarization of the more significant visit findings. Team meetings are built into the schedule each day to allow time for team dialogue and consensus building on report statements.

### **School, School District, and Team Member Orientation:**

Orientation sessions are held for schools and districts receiving a site visit, as well as for team members. Orientation sessions are typically conducted in September and October. A choice of attending a face-to-face training or a training held over the Iowa Communications Network (ICN) is provided. Face-to-face trainings are conducted in each AEA by the DE school improvement consultant assigned to the AEA. ICN trainings are conducted by volunteer DE school improvement consultants. A Power-Point presentation guides the orientation sessions. Time is provided during the orientation sessions to review the interview process, document review process, sample site visit schedules, report development process, and other school and district issues about which team members should be aware.

### **Components of the Site Visit:**

Activities and processes that are consistently implemented in all site visits include document review, school/district overview, interviews, written report of findings, and site visit highlights shared at the conclusion of the site visit. On all public school district site visits, attention to equity, federal title programs, special education, and career and technical education is incorporated with more limited incorporation of these areas on non-public school visits as appropriate.

- **Document Review** – Items included in the document review are primarily based in Chapter 12 requirements, as well as some requirements based in federal law. For example, Chapter 12 requirements that are reviewed include attendance center, program, and course enrollment data by race, national origin, gender, and disability; selected school board policies; school calendar; administrator and teacher personnel evaluation; the elementary, middle school/junior high school, and high school programs; documentation regarding the vocational advisory committee; documentation regarding the school district's special education program and services; documentation regarding the school district's gifted and talented and at-risk programs; curriculum, standards, and grade level benchmarks; documentation regarding professional development; documentation regarding the school or school district's School Improvement Advisory Committee; and personnel and student records. Documents are also reviewed regarding homeless children and youth, English Language Learners, technology, Safe and Drug-Free Schools program, unsafe school choice option, and child nutrition programs required through federal law. All of these elements are reviewed on public school district site visits, with some exceptions to this listing on non-public school site visits.

Additional documents reviewed during an in-depth equity site visit include non-discrimination grievance procedures, affirmative action plan, counseling materials, employment application, and personnel evaluation forms.

- **District Overview** – Schools and school districts provide an overview of their educational programs at the beginning of the site visit. School leaders share accomplishments, areas of challenge, and the demographics of the district and its students. School leaders are provided a suggested outline by the DE to help organize thinking and planning for the overview. The outline usually follows the organizing format of the site visit report, including bulleted descriptors of each component.
- **Interviews** -- Interviews are an essential element of the site visit process. The convergence between what team members learn through documentation and what they hear district stakeholders say provide validation that what team members include in the report to the school or school district is accurate. Interview groups include the following: administrators, school board members, teachers (general education and special education teachers), students, parents, support staff, School Improvement Advisory members, special program providers, and sometimes (optional) community groups. Site visits with an in-depth focus on equity have separately scheduled interviews with the district equity coordinator; guidance, English as a Second Language, media, gifted and talented, and at-risk staff; school nurse; athletic director, activity director, coaches, and physical education teachers, and human resources director.
- **Observations** – A building tour is currently part of the site visit. The information is used to enhance the context of team members' understanding of the school or school district. The information is not used for evaluation and is not directly referenced in the site visit report. Building tours are viewed as a way to recognize school staff for their efforts in preparation for the site visit and to provide a snapshot of the school or school district.
- **Team Consensus** – Team members contribute to the development of the site visit report. Team members create statements of strength and suggestions for improvement based on the synthesis of documentation, interviews, and observations. Once the statements have been drafted, the team leader leads team members through a consensus process by reading each

statement in the report. If consensus cannot be reached, the team leader makes the final decision on a particular statement's inclusion or exclusion from the report.

### **Post-Review Activities**

About six weeks after the site visit, an official report is sent to the school or school district's school board president and the superintendent (public school) or principal (non-public school). During the intervening time, the site visit team leader has edited the rough report draft and shared the report with at least two others for editing (content, clarity, grammar, and mechanics). When a district has received a site visit that includes an in-depth focus on equity, a separate report regarding equity issues is sent at the same time as the site visit report.

- **Organization of Site Visit Report** – The components of the site visit report have evolved over time. The site visit report is currently organized around the four constant conversation questions found in the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP). The questions include the following: What do data tell us about student learning needs? What are we doing to improve student learning? How do/will we know that student learning has changed? How do we know that programs and services are making a difference in student learning? A fifth component of the site visit report is, "Other," which addresses licensure, school board policy, school calendar, and other issues not otherwise addressed in the report. The Chapter 12 Non-compliance Matrix and the Outside of Chapter 12 Matrix are also included.

Fall 2007, the site visit report format will change as a result of over a year of studying research regarding improved schools. The site visit report will be organized around seven themes of improved schools (mission, vision, and goals; leadership; collaborative relationships; learning environment, curriculum and instruction; professional development; and monitoring and accountability).

- **Compliance Plan** -- The school or school district has 45 days after receiving the site visit report to submit a *plan of correction* noting the corrective action that will be taken, the evidence of correction that will be submitted, and a timeline for completion. Licensure non-compliances must be immediately corrected which may include removing the non-compliant teachers from the noted assignments.

**Monitoring Corrections** – The site visit team leader (DE School Improvement Consultant) is responsible for monitoring site visit non-compliances. If the corrective action plan is not received within 45 days of the site visit report being sent to the school or school district, the School Improvement Consultant notifies the district. After evidence of corrective action has been received for all non-compliances noted, the School Improvement Consultant notifies the school or school district in writing (e-mail or U.S. mail) that the school or school district is in compliance with the items specified in the site visit report.

### **Consequences of Continued Non-Compliance**

If a school or school district is unable to comply or refuses to comply, it would initiate Phase II of the accreditation process. Phase II requires the use of an accreditation committee, appointed by the Director of the Department of Education, to conduct an on-site visit, if any of the following conditions exist:

- When either the annual monitoring or the biennial on-site visit of Phase I indicates that a

school or school district is deficient and fails to come into compliance with accreditation standards.

- In response to a petition requesting a Phase II visit that is signed by eligible electors residing in the school district equal in number to at least twenty percent of the registered voters of the school district and filed with the Director.
- In response to a petition filed with the Director requesting such a committee visitation that is signed by twenty percent or more of the parents or guardians who have children enrolled in the school or school district.
- The State Board of Education may direct that a Phase II visit is conducted.

## Appendix

The following documents related to the School Improvement Site Visit Process can be found on the Department of Education website at [www.iowa.gov/educate](http://www.iowa.gov/educate) . The school improvement documents can be located using the Quick Links alphabetical index under **school improvement**. The Equity Review documents can be located by using the Quick Links alphabetical index under **equity education**.

1. **Public School Site Visit Schedule:** This document includes the schedule for School Improvement Site Visits through 2014.
2. **Model School Improvement Visit Schedule with List of Required Interviews:** This document includes a generic model schedule for a visit. School districts adapt the model in putting together a schedule for their district. A list of staff members that must be interviewed on each visit is included.
3. **Public School Document Review Checklist:** This document includes a list of the documents which must be available and reviewed during the course of an on-site visit.
4. **School Improvement Conversation Starters for Public and Non-Public School Visit Interviews:** This document includes common questions that are asked for each required interview conducted during the on-site visit.
5. **LEA Site Visit Training Slide Show:** This document includes the Power Point slideshow that is used by Department Staff when conducting the orientation to the School Improvement Site-Visit Process.
6. **District Presentation Guidelines:** This document presents guidance to school districts on what content to include in the District's presentation to the visitation team at the beginning of the site visit.
7. **Educational Equity Review: Information for School Districts:** This document presents an over-view of the Equity Review Process. Equity reviews are conducted concurrently with school improvement visits in some school districts each year.
8. **Educational Equity Review Guide & On-Site Manual K-12:** This document is completed by equity team members during an equity visit. It may also be used as a self evaluation tool by school districts.
9. **The Equity Data Needs Manual:** Data other than BEDS data, which is needed to conduct an Equity Review